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ABSTRACT

When one high school English teacher became engaged in active research, she reflected on her practice and learned to have faith in her students as learners and in herself as a teacher, and to ground her teaching practice consciously in theory. Her investigation centered on the question of whether teaching literary theory in the high school English classroom would serve as an effective intervention, further developing students' engaged reading of text, their interpretive strategies, and metacognitive awareness of the reading and interpretive process. The project sought to discover if knowing about theory would help students become more effective readers and interpreters of text and to measure student receptivity to and application of several theoretical approaches to literature. The project was implemented in a World Literature English classroom with an academically diverse and multi-age grouping, employing a qualitative, empirical approach to the research question. Data were gathered in several genres: narratives of classroom inquiries and presentations, illustrative transcripts of student discussion and interviews, student-generated artifacts of written pieces and artistic renderings, and research vignettes highlighting key points and ideas. Findings suggest that the research hypothesis was accurate. It is logical and appropriate to emphasize the interaction of literary and reading theory in the secondary English classroom to form a comprehensive and powerful literacy pedagogy. Learning various theoretical approaches gave students who had not been successful in previous literature or arts classes an advantage because their reading was scaffolded by theory, setting a purpose and structure for their construction of meaning. (NKA)

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ENVISIONING THE CRITICAL CLASSROOM: CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND SECONDARY ENGLISH EDUCATION

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I taught high school English for eight years, and the first three years largely without a concept of personal pedagogy or theory. It was only when I began an action research project that I began to become cognizant of the pedagogical beliefs I enacted each day in my teaching practice. As I became engaged in active research, I reflected on my practice and learned to have faith in my students as learners, have faith in myself as a teacher, and to ground my teaching practice consciously in theory. In other words, I became a critical pedagogue and began to encourage my students to develop a critical stance when they interacted with the texts they encountered in their daily lives.

My investigation centered on the question of whether teaching of literary theory in the high school English classroom would serve as an effective intervention, further developing students' engaged reading of text, their interpretive strategies, and metacognitive awareness of the reading and interpretive process. This project sought to discover if knowing about theory would help students become more effective readers and interpreters of text and to measure student receptivity to and application of several theoretical approaches to literature. In the process of conducting this research, I also found myself reflecting on and questioning the fundamental notions I held as a teacher.

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I hypothesized that (1) reading and interpretation are both the result of constructing meaning from text and involve the activation of a reader's schema, or prior knowledge, to elicit a response; (2) when students are aware of the strategies they use to construct meaning, they can more readily make the cognitive leap from reading and interpretation to criticism; and, (3) this can be accomplished by introducing students to different schools of literary theory, which extends constructivist education into the secondary English classroom. The results of this study indicate that my hypothesis was accurate; it is logical and appropriate to emphasize the intersection of literary and reading theory in the secondary English classroom to form a comprehensive and powerful literacy pedagogy.

This was an action research project implemented in a high school English classroom, employing a qualitative, empirical approach to the research question. Data was gathered in several genres: narratives of classroom inquiries and presentations, illustrative transcripts of student discussion and interviews, student-generated artifacts of written pieces and artistic renderings, and research vignettes highlighting key points and ideas. This research draws on classroom experience and practice in a suburban high school with an academically diverse and multi-age grouping of World Literature students, many of whom were at risk of failure, disengaged, or disenfranchised in English language arts classes or school in general. Many students came from socio-economically disadvatanged homes and had not been experiencing a level of achievement commeasurate with their peers. A smaller percentage of these students had been in a college-prep sequence of English classes and had extensive exposure to literature, but generally claimed as one student put it, that they "were not

into reading or writing." Others had previously been placed in remedial English programs and had never taken a high school literature course. All were at risk of either falling through the cracks or dropping out of school altogether.

This project is, in part, an ethnographic study of the classroom culture and the different ways in which students behave and make sense of text, both verbally and in writing. The classroom culture is particularly important throughout this study, and issues of socially constructed meaning are often addressed, including narratives and writing excerpts that reflect that influence. My experiences with students in the classroom are unique, as are every teacher's, because the social and cultural combination of students will always contribute to an interpretive community that is different from any other. Through data analysis and classroom observations, I identify features of the students' experiences that engendered discourse leading to improved comprehension and meaning construction. Classroom transcripts, anecdotes, and narratives record specific incidents in which circumstances of a teaching situation surprised or challenged me. I use these incidents to exemplify the processes in which my students engaged to construct meaning from text and the world around them. I also use narratives and anecdotes to illustrate times that my approaches and/or methods did not produce the results I had hoped for. Including these glimpses into the culture of my classroom and the various interactions between individual students, between groups of students, and between students and myself add essential dimensions to this study. The narrative and anecdotal evidence is crucial in capturing the essence of the interaction and significance of student inquiry and their written responses.

The investigation also required extensive research into theories and theorists involved in the scholarly debate over teaching both reading and literature and their implications for the English Language Arts curriculum, tracing the essential development of theoretical discourse from Aristotelian philosophy to the present day. These approaches included reader-response theory; archetypal or Jungian theory; structural, New Critical and other text-based theory, authorial-based theory, with an emphasis on marginalized or minority perspectives; and an extensive student inquiry project centering on post-modernist and "ideological" literary theory. Reflections on teaching, research and constructing literary meaning serve to elucidate incidents and ideas that were instructive and meaningful to me and to my students, and center on the curricular development of a progressive and systematic study of multiple perspectives and theoretical approaches to literary interpretation. I was a participant in my research as well, interacting and participating in the learning process with students. Being "present" in the research situation provided additional insight into how students were engaging in the methods I tested throughout the study. I am proud to take my place in a strong and continuing tradition of reflective practitioners and teacher researchers who employ qualitative methods to lay the foundation for continued renewal and change in our schools.

The results of this investigation indicate that students can readily engage in theoretical discussion, and in doing so make significant progress towards becoming more proficient and engaged readers and interpreters of textual material, enabling them to progress from a level of functional and/or cultural literacy to critical literacy

as they were challenged to construct meaning from text. Specifically emphasizing literary theory set a higher purpose for reading, and served to:

- increase student motivation and engagement with the literary experience,
- encourage students to investigate a broad range of philosophical perspectives,
- empower students to make choices of interpretive method and reading material,
- scaffold student inquiry into literature that spoke to them on a personal level,
- integrate multiple literacies, encouraging students first to recognize, then embrace or refute an ideological argument.

Because the systematic study of interpretive theory provided them with experience recognizing the author's or socio-cultural perspective, students became more sensitive and responsive to the inherent ideology of a literary work. Culminating in an in-depth research project, student inquiry spanned a broad spectrum of interpretive perspectives such as existentialism, feminism, various theological ideologies, post-modernism, and diverse cultural and political issues as they began to more clearly recognize the underlying ideologies inherent in various texts. As they developed these interpretive skills, students were encouraged to read even more.

My project combined traditional literary research with action research befitting my role as a reflective practitioner. In part, my investigation was conducted, as described by Patricia Lambert Stock in "Toward a Theory of Genre in Teacher Research: Contributions from a Reflective Practitioner" (English Education. 33:2,

2001, pp. 100-114), "in a genre that allowed me to bring the professional tools I had learned in my interdisciplinary education to bear on my professional work…to collect 'empirical' phenomena about teaching and learning for study…to interpret and re-interpret those phenomena…to develop effective instructional materials and practices" (104). This unique combination lends an authenticity to my presentation of the classroom situations and the theory that informed my practice, blurring the lines between "propositional knowledge (knowing-that) and procedural knowledge (knowing-how)" (Stock 104). The analysis and results provide the propositional knowledge and the results of testing the application of those theories in the English classroom provide the procedural knowledge. In both ways, this investigation contributes tremendous insight into developing literacy curricula.

Teaching literary theory draws upon similarities in reading and literature pedagogies, unifying methods for teaching reading, interpretation and criticism. Teaching literary theory served as a natural continuation of teaching reading strategies, building on the intellectual foundation laid by early literacy instruction. Most students learned to read within curricula that include a combination of instructional plans focusing on lessons in phonemic awareness and schema-based meaning construction. These pedagogies can be extended into the secondary curricula, but must remain relevant and challenging, rather than remedial and repetitive; this is possible when theoretical constructs are made explicit and integrated within literature instruction.

For example, New Critical theory heavily emphasizes the importance of phonemic and grammatical textual cues much like the phonics-based instruction

central to early reading programs. At the same time, reader-response literary theory emphasizes the importance of the reader's schema, or prior knowledge, and the ways in which this influences meaning construction, much like schema-based reading instruction in elementary reading curricula. This forms a central theme in the research I present; students learn about various perspectives in literary analysis and interpretation, while at the same time they are learning solid reading strategies and even reluctant or remedial readers' engagement with text is significantly enhanced.

I found that specifically teaching response theory to be the basic scaffold for teaching theory in general; asking students to construct meaning from text in any form is asking them to generate and articulate a response. In this way, response theory became a method to encourage metacognitive awareness of how meaning is constructed from text, and served as an extension of the reading instruction that students began in the early grades. However, there is a danger inherent in exclusively using a response approach without introducing students to basic theoretical concepts and frameworks for construcing meaning. Response as an interpretive strategy should not legitimize a random flow of a reader's affective experiences and call those ideas lieterary interpretation. Those affective experience are, instead, an essential first contact with a work and can help students process through the initial reading of a text, leading to a critical interpretation of the work. They learned to discuss their reading more openly and thoughtfully, to explore their "gut reaction" to a text, and understand better how they used their prior knowledge to construct meaning.

Archetypal theory served to introduce students to the process of assuming a particular stance in approaching a text. This unit, which included elements of

Jungian, myth, psychoanalytic, and structural theory, helped students conceive of the concept of "self" in the interpretive process, investigating why readers respond to textual situations. The goal was to encourage metacognitive awareness of textual cues and restraints that a reader may unconsciously use to construct meaning and engage with a text. As they began to notice and construct meaning from recurrent patterns of imagery, students also began to consider why they respond to literature, why it touches the deepest reaches of a reader's unconscious mind, and why a reader may so closely identify with the hero of a given story.

The class also studied text-based theory, including structuralism, formalism, and New Criticism, emphasizing the objective nature of these approaches to textual interpretation. I did not differentiate specifically between these approaches in the classroom, but used the basic concepts of each to present an argument for text-based construction of meaning as opposed to the more affective methods presented in the first chapters. I found that the ability to engage in close, textual reading should be a part of every student's repertoire of cognitive strategies, but should not form the primary basis for an intensive text-based instructional strategy. Instead, teaching objective theories as a part of a larger instructional plan gives students additional meaning-making options and, when understood as one way of reading among many, can contribute to student-constructed response.

Biographical criticism, provided scaffolding for students to observe how consciously using historical and personal information about an author could help them reconstruct the author's meaning. More importantly, however, it also helped them to further articulate and clarify their own responses to a work. When students

recognized this approach as yet another method for reading and interpreting a text, they could recognize the importance of prior knowledge in the interpretive process, whether that prior knowledge was detailed information about the author, the genre and conventions of the work itself, or their own life experiences. A biographical approach also encouraged students to understand a culture or way of life that might be very different from their own. As students engaged in reading and research about various cultural texts, they experienced the difficulties encountered by others, learning that different people have different life perspectives and developing a sharper sense of empathy for the struggle that others have had at times to merely survive.

After students had become more comfortable with critical interpretation and literary theory, I found that student-generated inquiry served as a means to cover the myriad of modern and post-modern texts and approaches to literary interpretation. I used the term "thematic criticism" to cover this broad range because it covers many of the concepts of student inquiry more precisely than the term "post-modern" or "post-structuralism." I was faced with a delimma: if I introduced students to specific theory, I would have to choose between a few additional approaches and omit others; if I let students engage in their own inqury, I could not be sure they would have enough critical scaffolding to tackle difficult theoretical concepts. I presented two general themes, sociological and philosophical, and allowed students to discover details in their search for meaning as they read. I chose these terms because both invite further study of modern and historical thought, allowing students to focus their ideas without overly limiting their opportunities for developing an interpretive stance to any text they chose to read. Students read novels they chose individually, and

became increasingly self-directed as we moved toward an investigation of theory, methods, and texts to encompass the larger frameworks of thought and culture. Because they had already grasped theory when I presented it sequentially and in structured activities, they were able to conceive of and apply ideological and philosophical approaches such as Marxism, feminism, cultural studies, deconstruction, historicism and the like. Consequently, we discussed theory and terminology in tangential mini-lessons, takling larger concepts as they arose in discussion.

My final conclusions from this research indicate that learning various theoretical approaches gave students who have not been successful in previous literature or language arts classes an advantange because their reading was scaffolded by theory, setting a purpose and structure for their construction of meaning. Organizing units of study around a theoretical base refined and enhanced the existing curriculum, allowing for differentiation of instruction, rather than merely becoming one more thing to teach in an already over-loaded curriculum. Incorporating and inquiry-based, critical approach created a "comm" / of learners" atmosphere in which I learned at least as much as I taught. Students found they had something solid and important to say about what and how they read, and the language with which to say it. They moved from the level of functional literacy (decoding), to critical literacy (recognizing underlying ideologies), uncovering dimensions of meaning and becoming cognizant of their own strategies for constructing that meaning.

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